The Whispering Gallery

In Which We Are Convinced a Fine Novel About the Negro Has at Last Been Written and in Which We Make a Celestial Journey.

By DONALD ADAMS.

NEGRO character has been stereotyped for us in the pages of fiction and in countless anecdotes as carefree, indolent and thieving; to these qualities has been added occasionally in the rosewater romances of the South the quality of doglike devotion. We have let it go at that, just as we have accepted a stereotype of the American Indian which presents him as slightly more capable of the lighter emotions than the wooden counterpart of him that formerly stood outside our cigar stores.

We remember it came as something of a shock when one of our friends, who, as an anthropologist, had spent years in intimate association with the Indians of North America, informed us that he knew no people more fun loving than they. Even then we accepted his estimate with reservations. Later acquaintance with Amos One Road, a Sioux, and Humptulips Jimmy, a Siwash, brought us round to another way of thinking.

One Road, who is now a missionary among his people out in the Dakotas, could be as gay upon occasion as any man; and we shall never forget the sly fooling of Humptulips when he acted as our guide down the Quinault River in the Olympic Peninsula, or the chuckles of his fat squaw when we shaved a rock just this side of an upset.

Indians, to be sure, outside the tales of Cooper and a host of boys' stories, have never figured much in fiction. Nine cases out of ten the conception we have of them is derived from reading we did before we were fourteen, or from fugitive glimpses that the Wild West show afforded. But the negro, however inadequately described, shuffles through numberless magazine and book pages.

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'Birthright.'

SO far as we know the only novel that makes more than a caricature or a sentimental picture of the negro is T. S. Stribling's "Birthright," which the Century Company has just published. For that reason and because "Birthright" is a novel of excellent quality we hope the book will have a wide reading.

We do not know whether Mr. Stribling wrote his book chiefly from the standpoint of one interested in telling a story or for the effectiveness it might have in bringing home to as wide a public as possible the situation in which the black race finds itself in this country to-day. Whatever his chief concern may have been, "Birthright" is certain to set people thinking about the negro problem who never thought much about it before.

The author, who is himself white, advances no solution of this racial difficulty, and there is no reason why one should be demanded of him. Nor does he predict that dire things will happen unless some solution is found. He makes us realize very sharply the personal tragedies that have resulted from the blending of white blood with black, and he makes very clear the injury we have done the negro by accepting blindly the stereotypes of his character by which we judge him.

There is the matter for instance of petty thievery. It is regarded as an axiom, North and South, that negro servants will steal. Mr. Stribling's Peter Siner, a mulatto, who, after a Harvard education, goes back to the Tennessee town where he was reared to help in the education of his race, tries to tell the white people that they have made a thief of the negro. "You pay your cook a dollar or two a week," he tells them, "and expect that she will carry off a certain amount of food and clothing. Wouldn't you rather pay her a decent wage and remove the necessity for stealing?"

They laugh at him. "You can't change a nigger," is the invariable reply. Mr. Stribling points out that slavery made impossible a growth of the sense of property rights in the negro. He had none of his own.

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The story of Peter Siner is that of a man who undertakes one of the most disheartening tasks that can be chosen in America. What final measure of success he achieved Mr. Stribling does not attempt to tell. His first efforts leave him baffled, defeated, but with at least a clearer conception of the difficulties that confront him. Peter goes out one day and tries to make clear to a group of blacks playing craps on a corner that salvation lies in work. Their childish inability to concentrate on his argument leaves him with a helpless feeling. It was his white blood, he realizes, that made him struggle for his education.

Mr. Stribling's negroes have a reality about them which we have never before found in a book. He has caught and rendered their mannerisms with a vivid quality which makes one accept unhesitatingly the truth of his picture. We found ourself thinking, "That's so; they are like that," time and again. He is a Tennesseean and grew up in a town whose population is largely black.

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A Heaven or Two.

LOUIS UNTERMEYER has been amusing himself with a few visions of the Hereafter as they might have been planned and retired to by H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, George Moore, James Branch Cabell and some others. They are incorporated in a book called "Heavens" (Harcourt, Brace), which includes also a group of parodies in which contemporary poets are revealed wrestling with the theory of relativity.

It was an excellent idea so far as its application to Chesterton and Wells is concerned, but we can see no particular reason for constructing the others.

Mr. Wells is discovered in his paradise, manipulating the Time Machine. Presently the magnetic arrow points to the year 5,320,506. We lean over the crystal with him and discover the earth arrived at the stage of being pretty well frozen out of the universe. Two of its inhabitants are discussing the progress of mankind.

"They were swathed in bands of thermic electrons; what showed of their faces was bloodless. Their lips did not move—the organs of speech had disappeared during the second stage of telepathic communication—and only the minute dilations of the pupils during some emotional passage animated their chiseled immobility."

They telepath their reflections to one another. Man had taken to living in undergrolund tunnels because it is too cold to exist on the surface. "Progress," one of the figures is scornfully telepathing. "We are as sunk in apathy and ignorance as our mythical ancestors in the pre-historic twentieth century. . . Here, in some obscure and forgotten epoch, the long necked Brontosaurus waded and the Diplodocus thrashed his thirty foot tail. . . . And all for what?"

And his companion answers: "For some transfiguration, some sort of world cleansed of its crippling jealousies, its spites, its blunderings. . . . And after all there is a long time left ahead. Man has existed for little more than ten or twelve million years. We are still so new. The future is so enormous, so staggering, so superb. . . . Men will in some distant maturity adjust their scattered dreams and energies."

Parody of Mr. Wells, if you like, but we are not sure that isn't a faithful reproduction of the sort of conversation we might expect to hear if we could all go back to Methuselah.

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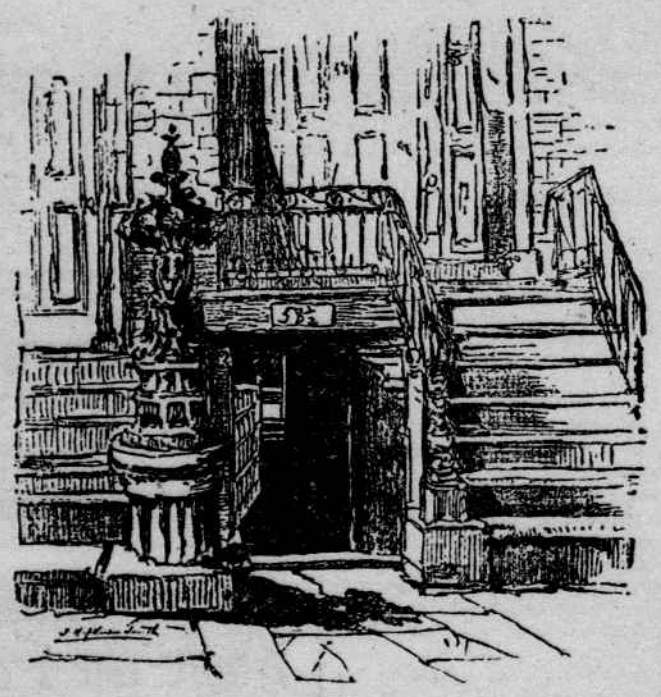
Milne Confesses.

A. A. MILNE, one of the most successful young English invaders, by way of the theater and the light essay, has written a detective story, "The Red House Mystery," which Dutton has just published. We haven't read it yet, but we were amused at Milne's explanation of how he came to write the book. "I have always adored detective stories," he says, "and I have always thought they must be great fun to write. One day, about three years ago, I thought of rather a good way of murdering somebody. Instead of leaving it at that, I went on thinking about it, and finally decided that it would make a good story. I began to write the first chapter and left the story to take care of itself."

Literary Pilgrimages at Home and Abroad

IV. The New York Home of Colonel Carter of Cartersville.

IN the New York of thirty or forty years ago some of the most picturesque structures were invisible to those who merely passed along cross street or up or down longitudinal avenue. They were the rear houses of yesteryear, or, in the congested districts of the downtown East Side, the rear tenements, in the latter case as mysterious, dirty and sinister as those of



the purlieus of Great Saffron Hill and Little Saffron Hill, described by Dickens in "Oliver Twist," or the damp, sweating walls of the old Cite, pictured by Eugene Sue in "The Mysteries of Paris." But in parts of old New York, other than the downtown East Side, there were rear buildings not inhabited by "fences" and "ogresses," but by altogether respectable and amiable persons of real life or of fiction. For example, such a structure was the New York home of the late F. Hopkinson Smith's Col. George Fairfax Carter of Cartersville, Fairfax county, Virginia, during that period of his illustrious life when he was in the metropolis for the purpose of trying to interest the agents of English syndicates in his railway scheme, the consummation of which would have given some of the very first families of Virginia easy access to the Atlantic coast. In the novel the Colonel's address was given as 58½ Bedford place. Actually Bedford place was West Tenth street between Fifth and Sixth avenues.

Of course, as you pass along West Tenth street to-day there is no such number as 58½, nor has there been for many years. No. 58 was long the residence of the late Maitland Armstrong, the artist. It was in the nineties of the last century that Mr. Armstrong, remodeling the front house, obliterated the "58½" that marked the entrance to the long, low, narrow tunnel that led from the street to the rear house. That tunnel is familiar to all who remember "Colonel Carter of Cartersville." It was used by the Colonel for pistol practice in preparation for the expected duel with the broker Klutchem, who had spoken in terms of disparagement of the Colonel's projected air line railway in Virginia. The Colonel had dispatched a fiery challenge but had failed to affix a stamp. His subsequent arguments that if Klutchem's own Government, the United States of America (Carter clung to the traditions of the Confederacy), would not trust Klutchem to the extent of the two cents needed for the delivery of the letter Klutchem was not worthy to be met on the field of honor.

Why does the novelist pick a particular home for his hero? That is a question often asked. There was nothing indefinite in F. Hopkinson Smith's selection of a structure when he brought Col. Carter to New York. The old frame rear house that was No. 58½ West Tenth street was the home of the Tile Club, of which the author-artist-lighthouse constructor was a member. As an organization that club was unique in the annals of artistic life in America. It originated in the autumn of 1877 when one afternoon a little group of painters, among them Smith, Edwin A. Abbey, Swain Gifford, W. R. O'Donovan, J. H. Twachtman and Elihu Vedder, had gathered in the studio of Napoleon Sarony. Soon it found its quarters in 58½ West Tenth street. It is small wonder that F. Hopkinson Smith, seeking a New York home for his Virginian hero, turned to the old structure that he knew and loved so well.